

# INTRODUCTION

## Flight and Exile—Uncertainty in the Context of Conflict-Induced Displacement

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**Abstract:** This introduction addresses the ways in which flight and exile create particular types of uncertainty, including both radical and protracted, in people's lives. We argue that the concept of uncertainty, in its meaning of imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future, is central to studies that theorize conflict-induced displacement, transit, and refugeeness. We start with an exploration of the spatial and temporal aspects of uncertainty in situations of displacement, and within that we discuss how uncertainty functions as a governing mechanism. We then analyze the ways that refugees and those internally displaced navigate situations of radical and protracted uncertainty. This article and those that follow in this special issue suggest that in our analysis of conflict-induced displacement, we must understand uncertainty rather than certainty as the norm.

**Keywords:** conflict, coping, displacement, hope, social navigation, temporal and spatial dimensions, uncertainty, waiting

Uncertainty is a permanent condition in human lives, a fundamental experiential realm of human existence. At the same time, as we will argue throughout this special issue, conflict and conflict-induced displacement produce both 'radical' and 'protracted' uncertainty. In what ways do conflict and displacement create these particular types of uncertainty in people's lives? How do we understand and theorize the temporal and spatial aspects of uncertainty in contexts of forced displacement? And how can accounts of the ways that refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) deal with radical and protracted uncertainty during flight and exile refine theoretical debates on social navigation? The articles in this special issue address these central questions in order to argue for the importance of understanding displacement, transit, and refugeeness as contexts of uncertainty.



The type of precariousness that conflict and displacement create reconfigures societies in abrupt, dramatic, and contradictory ways. The speed and unpredictability of unfolding events, the experience of violence, and the need to take risks in conflict situations delimitate a particular experience of radical uncertainty. In contexts of conflict and flight, it is often urgent to act, but this is at the same time difficult to do because of a dearth of information. While before and during flight displaced people have to deal with changes and challenges that occur at rapid speed and in highly dramatic ways, in exile uncertainty often takes on a much more protracted and slow form. The protractedness of many conflicts and, by extension, of displacement creates liminal situations for refugees and IDPs (Agier 2011; Horst 2006b; Malkki 1995a; Turner 2004), in which hope and waiting play central roles. As various articles in this special issue illustrate, liminality in protracted conflict and displacement can be seen in light of the dynamic nature of the waiting that accompanies it. While radical and protracted uncertainties are interrelated, the distinction between the two allows for a better understanding of the temporal and spatial dimensions at stake in conflict and displacement situations, as well as the risks, opportunities, and strategies that are involved when navigating them.

Crises are largely seen as external events interfering with a certain stable social reality (Horst 2006b; Vigh 2008). And yet, as Davis (1992: 152) underscores, for many “war is a part of social experience and is embedded in social life” while “causes of suffering are not exceptional breakdowns of social order, of the proper functioning of social institutions.” In other words, while conflict and uncertainty may produce radical uncertainties, it is important to understand and analyze these uncertainties as part of life rather than external to it. The radical uncertainties created by conflict and displacement are historical, embedded in the societies where they take place (Grabska 2014; Horst 2006b; Lubkemann 2008; Monsutti 2004). As Das (2006: 80) reminds us, conflict, violence, and abject poverty can be so embedded in the social fabric that they become indistinguishable from it, forcing people to make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds. Such realities have been described as a condition of ‘normality’ for many (Jackson 2008; Scheper-Hughes 2008; Whyte 2008).

Vigh (2008) aptly coined the term ‘chronicity’ to analyze this continuity in people’s experiences. For our purposes, however, chronicity does not suffice, as it firmly situates people within conditions of conflict and crisis, accepting and navigating those conditions as part of life. Although for refugees and IDPs uncertainty is a context, “a terrain of action and meaning rather than an aberration” (Vigh 2008: 8), it is not perceived as chronic or epidemic since displaced people per definition have not merely accepted conditions of conflict and crisis. Refugees and IDPs do not simply navigate within such contexts: their act of moving illustrates refusal to live in such conditions and introduces waiting and hope for the possibility to return or to re-create a better life elsewhere. Focusing on radical and protracted uncertainty, we draw attention to the particular and context-specific circumstances of those who experience flight and exile.

The articles in this special issue analyze the different types of uncertainties in a range of contexts of conflict-induced displacement. We conceptualize

displacement both in terms of a prolonged subjective experience of disenfranchisement in exile and as a reality with juridical implications. While some refugees acquire an official status, many remain in refugee-like situations without access to the limited privileges granted under international refugee law. The articles focus on protracted internal displacement realities in Georgia, Iraqi urban refugees in Cairo, the situation of refugees ‘in transit’ in Turkey, South Sudanese returnees from Kenya and Canada, and Bosnians resettled in the UK. In these different contexts, experiences of exile and often precarious legal positions combine to create conditions of uncertainty.

Anthropology has long focused on people in transition, those “uneasy about themselves in a world that ignores their desire and need for continuity” (Colson 2003: 3). The articles in this issue aim to bring long-term experiences of suffering, violence, and the precariousness of life into focus in new ways through a distinctly temporal and spatial analysis of uncertainty. These ethnographic studies in contexts of conflict-induced displacement extend the possibilities of developing anthropological concepts in new frames by examining the ways in which refugees and IDPs navigate such uncertainties. With the ‘mobilities’ turn in the social sciences (Hannam et al. 2006; Urry 2007), the particular experiences of those displaced by conflict are being sidelined because the role of power relations in different forms of movement is insufficiently recognized.<sup>1</sup> In academia as well as in policy and practice, refugees are increasingly understood as a subcategory of migrants, as if physical mobility is the most defining aspect of the refugee experience (Horst 2013a: 230). The articles in this issue instead argue that the radical and protracted uncertainty associated with conflict, flight, and exile is central to refugees’ experiences, particularly as this uncertainty is caused by the precarious position of refugees and IDPs within ‘the national order of things’ (Malkki 1995b).

The types of uncertainties that we propose to pursue analytically here are key to anthropological understandings of concepts such as waiting, violence, and risk, but also hope, coping, and governance. The articles in this special issue contribute to theorizing on these topics by focusing on the temporal and spatial realities of uncertainty created by conflict-induced displacement and the ways that displaced individuals cope with those realities. This focus has been one of the central drivers of the work behind this issue, allowing us to pose a number of questions in our attempts to understand the life-worlds of refugees and IDPs through ethnographic approaches: How do radical and protracted uncertainties affect people’s aspirations for the future and for their life- and place-making projects? What do communal and governmental attempts to create certainty look like? How can we analyze uncertainty in conflict-induced displacement in ways that allow us to explore the dynamic nature of agency in conditions of protracted uncertainty (Lubkemann 2008; Vigh 2008, 2009; Whyte 2008)?

In the remainder of this introductory article, we first define the concept of uncertainty. Then we analyze the temporal and spatial dimensions of uncertainty. A following section discusses the different ways that displaced people come to terms with the particular uncertainties they experience. In conclusion, we explore the implications of understanding uncertainty rather than certainty as the norm.

## Understanding Uncertainty: Definitions and Approach

In the literature on uncertainty, a distinction is made between two closely linked sources of uncertainty: imperfect knowledge and the unpredictability of the future (Williams and Baláž 2012: 168). The distinction lies in what Adam (2007: 5) calls *facta* and *futura*: “*Facta* have already taken (unalterable) form, *futura* are still open to influence.” The first source of uncertainty relates to things that are knowable—that is, they have already happened or are known to exist—but about which people do not have access to clear or convincing information. In conflict situations, this type of uncertainty is paramount: people are continually evaluating their safety and the best strategy for protecting themselves and their families. In circumstances dominated by rumors, contradictory accounts, and fearful speculations, the lack of reliable information causes great levels of uncertainty in an environment where people are terrified of pain, loss, and death. As such, a common trait of civilians caught in conflict is that they are constantly looking for information in order to create some sense of certainty. Dahabo’s account of what happened when the civil war broke out in Somalia illustrates this well:

From morning to evening, I was thinking about whether I would survive the afternoon, or whether I would survive the night. And if I survived the night, I would still wonder whether I would survive the next day. I was worried because people were losing their lives so suddenly. Even if I would have cooked very good food, I would not have been able to eat it because of worrying too much. I was too worried to sit, to eat something, to chew because I feared that people might come and kill me. At that time, I preferred to just drink milk or water quickly. Then I was off, I would ask what is happening, who is coming, where they have reached, what is the latest news. I was always after information. We were talking too much both during the day and at night. I just wanted to hear any rumour, and I wanted to see everything that was happening. From morning up to evening I did not get tired of carrying the children. My mind was too occupied with what was happening and I would ask people a lot of questions. (Horst 2006b: 60)

The problem with information during conflict is not only that it is vital yet hard to get, but also that it is very difficult to verify. During periods of conflict, formal information may be seen to be highly unreliable because it is often part of the war effort. The degree to which information is valued depends to a large extent on whom people feel they can trust. Thus, informal information and rumors may be looked on as more reliable than formal information if the government is involved in persecution or is not trusted for other reasons. Those who have fled from elsewhere are often important sources of information. At the same time, it is very difficult to verify the information that displaced people provide, as it is easily colored by fear and/or hatred. In the face of radical uncertainty during conflict, as Dahabo’s story illustrates, moving away is on everyone’s mind because the uncertainty of staying is often as great as the uncertainty of moving.

This relates to the second source of uncertainty, namely, the unpredictability of the future. As Boholm (2003: 167) underscores: “Uncertainty has to do with

what is unpredicted in life, the odd possibilities and irregular occurrences ... Uncertainty implies recognition of change and awareness that states of affairs are not static; they can alter drastically, for better or for worse.” While the unpredictability of the future is a fact of life in any situation, there are three aspects of realities in conflict and in displacement that create a heightened sense of unpredictability. The first is the imperfect knowledge about past and present just discussed, thus linking uncertainties of *facta* and *futura*. The second is the speed at which dramatic life-threatening occurrences take place in many conflict situations, especially if they lead to displacement. The third is the lack of control that refugees and IDPs have over many life choices because governments to a great extent determine their ability and rights to build an alternative future. This includes the government in the country of origin, whose policies impact possibilities to return, as much as governments of potential refuge, who regulate refugee status determination and treatment.

Uncertainty is often discussed in one breath with risk, but the concept of uncertainty has not informed analysis in the social sciences in the same way risk theory has. Risks can be understood as ‘known uncertainties’ or ‘known probabilities of outcomes’. Whereas the concept of uncertainty leaves all options open, starting from the unpredictability of the future, the concept of risk instead is based on a full understanding of possible outcomes and of the likelihood of those outcomes occurring—without knowing which outcome will occur in each individual instance. As such, the concept of risk can be understood as “a framing device which conceptually translates uncertainty from being an open-ended field of unpredicted possibilities into a bounded set of possible consequences” (Boholm 2003: 167). Whereas much of the research on risk as calculated uncertainty comes from economics, a socio-cultural approach toward risk “acknowledges the fact that risk knowledge is seen as historical and local, as constantly contested and as a subject to disputes and debates over their nature, their control and who is to blame for their creation” (Zinn 2006: 278). Understandings of risks thus can be interpreted as a strategy of managing and coping with uncertainty, a theme taken up in this special issue.

We argue that under conditions of mobility in conflict, a focus on uncertainty rather than risk is certainly more appropriate. The idea that risk is calculated uncertainty that “can be practically managed, reduced or increased ... taken or avoided, depending on one’s own and others actions and motives” (Boholm 2003: 167), does not match the realities of many of those caught up in conflict and having to make decisions about whether or not to move. It also does not accurately describe the situation of those who face protracted uncertainty in exile. Accounts of imperfect knowledge, confusing rumors, highly unpredictable events that unfold quickly, and a sense of lack of control over personal circumstances while faced with violence, death, and abrupt changes, as well as with migration management systems—all are common in the life histories of refugees and IDPs. Coming to terms with uncertainty, then, is often not about calculated risk taking but about coping through hope, waiting, negotiating, and navigating.

The radical uncertainty associated with situations of violent conflict, both in the sense of not having access to reliable information about what is happening and in the sense of the extreme unpredictability of the future, severely complicates people's decisions about whether to stay or move. Staying might involve a higher risk than leaving, so moving away from conflict is one way in which people protect themselves and reduce radical uncertainty. At the same time, migration generates the uncertainty of not knowing where one will end up and what will happen along the way. And, as we will see throughout this issue, the protracted uncertainty of being in between, both in a temporal and spatial sense, also comes with a fundamental lack of knowledge about one's situation and a profound sense of unpredictability about the future—as long as the present is not accepted as permanent by states and the people affected. We propose to distinguish between radical and protracted uncertainty in order to highlight these temporal and spatial dimensions of waiting and longing experienced by refugees and IDPs.

Two main themes run through the articles in this special issue. The first focuses on how uncertainty is experienced in people's relationship to time and place and on how states draw on this reality. Conflict-induced displacement is produced by radical uncertainty and is seen to require resolving. As Brun's article on 'active waiting' points out, even in protracted situations of displacement—or, as the author suggests, in "permanent impermanence"—everyday time "continues to flow through routinized practices and survival strategies." As such, explorations of how the temporal and spatial dimensions of uncertainties are experienced by refugees and IDPs are crucial. In contexts where waiting and hoping are central to people's experiences, temporality is key to understanding them. We will argue that uncertainty also plays a considerable role in the systems that govern the movements of the displaced and can be explored as a deliberate governance strategy that aims to discourage mobility and/or settlement in places of exile. Displaced populations are often considered—and consider themselves—in a liminal situation, waiting and hoping for the return that will normalize their situation again.

A second theme explores the ways in which individuals cope with uncertainties produced by conflict-related displacement. While waiting could be analyzed as a coping strategy in situations of protracted uncertainty, it is important to recognize the dynamic nature of that waiting in the different stages of the conflict and displacement. Furthermore, coping can have a more active nature as well. This has been explored through the concept of social navigation, which acknowledges ways in which individuals "act in difficult situations, move under the influence of multiple forces or seek to escape confining structures" (Vigh 2009: 419). Uncertainty creates spaces for negotiations between individuals and between individuals and states, ultimately leading to social transformations. Thus, the focus on uncertainty moves beyond an exploration of how individuals and states come to terms with it. Uncertainty can also be seen as a positive force for innovation and transformation. As Grabska and Fanjoy (this issue) show, these negotiations and transformations have strong gender and generational characteristics.

## Experiencing the Temporal and Spatial Dimensions of Uncertainty

Those who move to escape conflict and its consequences relate to the temporal and spatial dimensions of their displacement in unresolved ways. Exactly because of its spatial character, expressed through the physical act of moving, conflict-induced displacement becomes a distinct point in time as well. The dramatic occurrences and radical uncertainties created by conflict and displacement lead refugees and IDPs to long for a ‘before’ that is also an ‘elsewhere’, as time and place often get intertwined in their memories of the past and/or hopes for the future. In the words of an internally displaced woman in Tbilisi, Georgia: “[E]verything good that happened in my life happened there ... Everything good is related to that place. And my father is buried there. Besides, another thing has happened: it is that when I look forward, there is no light—it is blurred. When you can’t envisage the future, the only thing you can do is to think about the past. I have to think about the past” (Brun, this issue).

Many of those who are displaced similarly do not accept where they are, in the sense that they wish to be somewhere else and find it difficult to endure the present when the certainties of their past disappeared so suddenly and their future is uncertain and contested. Simultaneously, the displaced are seen as ‘matter out of place’ by the societies around them (Arendt 1958; Malkki 1992, 1995b). This creates an expectation of temporariness in situations that can only be described as chronic, but where various actors have an interest in holding on to this expectation of temporary exile, followed by return, long after its expiration date. So whereas violent conflict and the displacement it brings about often involve speed and radical change, the protracted uncertainty that follows with long-term displacement is to a certain extent caused by the unwillingness of individuals, governments, and donors to accept the status quo as the new reality. At the same time, of course, even if return does take place, it is never to the past—to the time and place that once was. ‘Shifting landscapes’ of home are impacted by a host of changes on the individual and societal level (see Grabska 2014; Grabska and Fanjoy, this issue; Hammond 2004).

There is a fundamental ambiguity in the attempts of humans to control or accept the future in their ‘quest for certainty’ (Dewey 1929). Adam (2007: 1) points out that we “create futures and ... anticipate what might happen as the result of our own and others’ actions ... without needing to think about it.” She locates this in modernity, with the control and colonization of time (Adam 2003), and opposes it to times long past and to traditional cultures, which do not see the ownership of time as lying in humankind’s hands and which instead focus on fate. While we consider the underlying Eurocentric evolutionary perspective problematic, Adam’s explorations are highly relevant to our analysis. In fact, we argue that people’s relationship with the future and how much they ascribe to destiny are to a large extent driven by the level of control they feel that they have. The fact that life is seen as risky and governed by fate rather than self-determination is connected to a person’s sense of his or her own powerlessness to affect events (Gardner 1995). Ownership also comes with responsibility, and for those whose future feels extremely unpredictable,

unknown, and out of their own hands, it may be very painful to create futures. Views on fate and destiny that are part of (religious) worldviews assist people to rationalize and justify the course of events or the impossibility of changing them (Benda-Beckmann and Benda-Beckmann 1994: 17). As a young woman who was a refugee in Egypt and suffered from mental problems expressed this, when asked about her future: “I don’t think in this way because thinking in this way made me suffer and sick [*ta’ab*] ... I pray to God and I’m living my day, because thinking of the future all the time is making me sick” (El-Shaarawi, this issue).

Over two-thirds of refugees in the world today are in protracted refugee situations. Millions of refugees struggle to survive in camps and urban communities in remote and insecure parts of the world, and the vast majority of these refugees have been in exile for many years (Loescher et al. 2008: 3). Simultaneously, European asylum systems increasingly produce cases of individuals who are left in limbo for decades in asylum camps or temporary lodgings. A number of the articles in this special issue discuss waiting as a crucial element of dealing with protracted uncertainty, where successful long-term waiting can be understood as managing everyday life while coming to terms with the underlying structural uncertainty. Such acceptance takes time while getting used to harsh everyday realities, so psychological pressures are often great. Protractedness, however, does not mean that a situation is necessarily static. As a consequence, the waiting that occurs in protracted displacement is often active and dynamic.

As Brun (this issue) argues, in protracted situations waiting changes from being short-term to long-term. The uncertainty that originally is very extreme, with high levels of unpredictability and an acute lack of knowledge about the constantly changing circumstances, becomes less severe when certain things become more predictable, when the speed of change slows down, and when more knowledge about what is happening and has happened becomes available. This occurs when both conflict and displacement become protracted. People shift from emergency mode to a mode where the feeling of ‘permanent impermanence’ is matched with the certainty and predictability of everyday routines. Although refugees may not accept where they are, their daily lives do continue, focusing on food, shelter, and care for family members. Simultaneously, as several articles in this special issue illustrate, even in the predictable everyday great levels of uncertainty are involved. The short-term uncertainty of the everyday blends with the longer-term uncertainty of imagining a future that is somewhere else—either back in the country of origin or in a third country that is stable and peaceful.

For displaced people, emotions play an important role in a range of contexts, and various articles in this issue introduce people who suffer severe stress and mental health problems as a consequence of protracted uncertainty. While risk research insufficiently addresses emotions and subjectivity, medical anthropological work on suffering in the face of violence and within spaces of transition and cultural change makes important contributions (Das 2006; Das et al. 2000; Das et al. 2001; Scheper-Hughes 1993, 2008; Whyte 1997, 2002). Robbins (2013) argues that in the 1980s, suffering became an important theme in anthropology that

marked a shift from a focus on the 'other' to one that highlighted shared human experiences related to pain, conflict, and violence. Some of that shift is explicitly linked to influential works on refugees and asylum (Agier 2011; Malkki 1995a).

The radical uncertainty associated with conflict and exile—with the risk of dying and the unpredictability of the future—creates feelings of insecurity and fear, of ambiguity and contradiction, of psychological stress. Ghorashi (2005) discusses these feelings beautifully when she describes the presence of the past in the lives of Iranian women in exile. Recounting her own emotional struggles as an outsider/researcher and an insider/ex-political Iranian activist now in exile, she reflects on the fact that some of her interviews took her back in time because of the nature of the words used by the women she interviewed: "In this way, revolutionary words became mediators between the past and the present and showed how the past remained an essential part of the present. Expressions were drawn from different periods of time and raised deeply embedded emotions. The revival of those words created in me the feeling of being completely transferred to another time, as if I had lived another life" (*ibid.*: 367). Ghorashi's writings—inspired by feminist anthropology—create space for emotions that often are seen not to belong in academic writing. A focus on uncertainty makes it difficult to ignore the emotional, as uncertainty creates strong emotions of various kinds. In Ghorashi's words: "When I first transcribed the women's voices, and listened to the uncertainties of their lives, I had to cry. Realizing how bleak they felt reminded me of my own feelings of uncertainty about the future and the pain of a lost home" (*ibid.*: 369).

States play a central role in the temporal and spatial dimensions of uncertainty that refugees and IDPs experience. In the context of asylum, Erica James (2009) describes the uncertainty and anxiety created by the politics of defining belonging and otherness in terms of 'neomodern insecurity'. There are two aspects to this: first, states identify marginalized groups, including refugees and IDPs, in terms of risk; second, measures to manage and control this risk create great levels of uncertainty for the people identified as such. In late modern times, attempts to eliminate uncertainty and colonize the future are central to common approaches in science, medicine, law, and other fields (Douglas and Wildavsky 1982; Tulloch and Lupton 2003). As Douglas (1992: 7) argues, in this process "certain marginalized groups are identified as posing risks to the mainstream community, acting as the repository for fears not simply about risk but about the breakdown of social order and the need to maintain social boundaries and divisions. These concerns about risk feed into the policy domain." For governments, people on the move represent an uncertainty that must be managed (Hammond 2011). It is crucial to study "how the production of knowledge about the risks associated with migration—both for migrants and especially for host societies—[comes] to define what are considered risks" (Williams and Baláz 2012: 177). This has been explored, yet often uncritically, in the migration literature that focuses on the securitization of migration.

At the same time, the policies and practices aimed at controlling mobility, including those related to border control, immigration measures, and aid provision, create extreme levels of uncertainty among the displaced (Horst 2013b).

The uncertainty created by conflict and displacement is thus maintained or heightened by the actions of states. Unable to gain the necessary information and knowledge to predict what will happen to them, refugees and IDPs often feel that their future is in the hands of authorities and bureaucracies that they do not understand. As Biehl (this issue) powerfully shows for the case of Turkey, maintaining a level of uncertainty among the displaced is a central element of governing them. This is the case in many situations beyond Turkey and relates to both *facta* and *futura*: the states that host displaced populations rarely provide them with sufficient knowledge about their situation, creating a range of vulnerabilities that they experience. The bureaucratic systems that ultimately decide central aspects of refugees' and IDPs' future—such as where they will live in the near and distant future and whether or not they have access to certain rights—create incredible levels of uncertainty. The unpredictability of life in exile for those without the legal right to live where they are—be it Turkey, Egypt, or any European country—is extremely high when every single day people fear that they may be asked to leave and return to their country of origin. This precariousness has a powerful governing effect on people, rendering them extremely vulnerable and consequently often unable to act. It creates an underclass of people who are not considered to have the same rights as others, in ways that Butler (2004) and Agier (2011) have similarly argued. As an exiled artist from Iran in Turkey expressed this experience: “Spiritually it is worse than Iran. We have no rights here; we are useless, not human. We have forgotten our humanity here. I don’t know myself here anymore. If they told us, ‘You must wait one year or two years,’ we would be OK. But the uncertainty, the fear of being rejected is tormenting. Every Monday my husband tries calling the UNHCR. But there is only one phone line, and it is open only between two and five o’clock. We thought our applications would be processed quickly” (Biehl, this issue).

### **Coming to Terms with Uncertainty: Hope, Navigation, and Negotiation**

By defining uncertainty rather than certainty as the norm, we are challenged to rethink understandings of coping. The refugees and IDPs introduced in the articles in this special issue face radical and protracted uncertainty that at times causes great mental stress. If our starting point is uncertainty and the inability to know, successful coping strategies are based not merely on cognitive capacities and the availability of information, but also on learning to deal with the fact of not knowing through a range of strategies. These include, *inter alia*, ‘the work of hope’ (Pedersen 2012), navigation, and negotiation.

Hope mediates uncertainty (Hernández-Carretero, forthcoming) and can also be a driver of action, as shown by Hage (2003) in his analysis of the coping strategies of Lebanese migrants in Australia. Others have also explored the interlinkages between uncertainty and hope in order to explore the relations between the emotions and actions that hope inspires. Hernández-Carretero (forthcoming) illustrates how hope and chance are tools through which Senegalese migrants

confront uncertainty. In his study of urban youth in Mongolia, Pedersen (2012: 138) similarly discusses hope as “a distinct form of work” for those people who “have no firm ground, in the form of a stable economic, religious, or political cosmos, on which to build their ideas of the future” (ibid.: 141). Hope can thus be understood as an emotion that mediates and creates the opportunity to act for “people without a future,” as Bourdieu (2000: 221) refers to North African youth in the *banlieues* in Paris.

But hope is a double-edged sword, as is clear from work on resettlement dreams in refugee camps (Horst 2006a). On the one hand, having hope for a future elsewhere makes it possible for people to cope with conditions in camps,<sup>2</sup> because it allows them to hold on to the idea of temporariness. The hope that a better future exists somewhere other than where they are now is what keeps people going, and a loss of such hope can lead to resignation and passivity, as well as to severe depression and other psychological problems. On the other hand, hope transposes energy and resources from the here and now to somewhere else and thus easily runs the risk of preventing people from accepting their present-day realities. This is particularly problematic when hope focuses on a future ability to return to a past that no longer exists—as illustrated in Grabska and Fanjoy’s article (this issue) exploring return to South Sudan—or to resettle in a place ‘abroad’ that is unreachable for most and does not actually exist in the way that it is imagined in the first place. Hope may prevent people from accepting their current situation and heightened uncertainty; it may prevent them from seeing the opportunities that currently exist and from investing in the here and now. Yet at the same time, if there is no hope, there is no reason for waiting. These aspects are explored by articles in this issue that analyze the situation of Iraqis in Cairo (El-Shaarawi), asylum seekers and refugees in Turkey (Biehl), and IDPs in Georgia (Brun). The authors examine protracted cases that involve people who engage in waiting for years, or even decades, and who struggle with the hope(lessness) of return or resettlement in different ways.

In the last decade, research has shown that people trapped in armed conflicts devise a variety of strategies, carefully navigating both confining and creative aspects of uncertainty (Coulter 2009; Finnström 2008; Lubkemann 2008; Raeymaekers 2011; Utas 2005a, 2005b). By focusing on the intentions, hopes, and risk-taking practices of refugees and IDPs, the articles in this issue extend these discussions, addressing how the displaced cope with their precarious present and future. Various authors have demonstrated the diversity of coping mechanisms in situations of chronic crisis and developed concepts to capture the ways in which people try to come to terms with uncertainty (Finnström 2008; Jackson 2008; Pedersen and Højer 2008; Whyte 1997; Scheper-Hughes 2008; Vigh 2008).

Whyte, for example, built on the term ‘subjunctivity’, which she describes as context-specific and active. In her long-term research in Uganda related to people coping with health issues, including AIDS epidemics, she argues that “humans are actively and intelligently engaged in creating a degree of insurance despite the lack of assurance” (Whyte 1997: 18). Her work is a clear

illustration of the fact that, in situations of extreme uncertainty, the search for solutions will, by definition, be more intense and radical, if not risky. At the same time, subjunctivity shows how uncertainty is culturally situated and needs to be analyzed in specific contexts from the perspective of the people affected, as the articles in this issue also powerfully demonstrate. The concept allows us to examine the intentions, hopes, and doubts of people looking toward an immediate future whose contours are not certain. As Grabska and Fanjoy (this issue) argue, subjunctivity helps us focus on the purposes and consequences of human behavior; it asks us to take seriously the question of what people are trying to do and to achieve.

There are many ways in which individuals cope pro-actively with uncertainty, and Vigh's (2009) explorations of social navigation are a useful starting point. How do people navigate in conditions that are constantly in flux, as Vigh explores, but also, how do they navigate in stable yet impermanent conditions or in conditions of severe dispossession? The articles in this special issue discuss a range of strategies that the displaced use for navigating uncertainty. Such strategies might be classified in terms of faith, precaution, or avoidance (Boholm 2003), or a combination of the three. People navigate uncertainty by maintaining trust in the future and their ability to deal with it, by taking action to prevent negative occurrences or their consequences, and by avoiding potentially negative futures. Navigation can thus entail great variation in the level of pro-activeness and engagement with possible outcomes. At times, the best way of coming to terms with the inevitable nature of the future might even be to stay inactive and accepting.

Explorations of social navigation that focus on motion (e.g., Vigh 2009) often fail to distinguish between those who choose to accept conditions of chronic conflict and crisis and those who choose to move away from them. For those who move and end up in contexts of protracted uncertainty that are seen as temporary, social navigation strategies are strongly context-dependent. Urban refugees often navigate by being invisible, a strategy to avoid harm, as explained by El-Shaarawi in this issue (see also Sommers 2001). Return can also be looked on as an opportunity to mitigate conflict-induced uncertainty: some returnees aim actively at acquiring a desired identity that was not possible while in exile, as illustrated by Grabska and Fanjoy (this issue) in their discussions of 'proper' masculinities upon return to South Sudan. Yet, paradoxically, return might result in creating new uncertainties in the lives of the displaced and the communities to which they return. The comment by a young South Sudanese man about his return experience demonstrates this clearly:

It is not easy, it is very hard. It seems now like the same as when I left Sudan the first time—I left Sudan just going where I was going—I didn't have a bed, didn't have a house, I didn't have anything. It's the same thing now that I came back to Sudan. I went to Wau [a city in South Sudan], and my dad has four houses and all my brothers are there and my sisters, but because I am the eldest son I should have one plot. But I told them, "No, I can't take it from one of you, you guys are coming from years in the bush, so I can't take it." So I am like a young boy

now starting all over again. It's like becoming a refugee all over again. (Grabska and Fanjoy, this issue)

Navigation also involves what Ryan-Saha (this issue) calls 'repossession', that is, the strategies that people use to regain possession and thereby to reclaim control and status. The Bosnians interviewed by Ryan-Saha have the right to live in the UK; they and their children have lived there for many years. Many of the uncertainties discussed in this introduction were resolved for them years ago, so they have the space to 'repossess'. As Ryan-Saha puts it: "To repossess, then, is to refill a life with things; it is to come to terms affectively and narratively with material loss and gain, to reappraise rhetorically what these things are and what they mean, and ultimately to take back into possession a life after displacement and dispossession."

Furthermore, social navigation does not take place primarily on an individual level. Many of the ways in which people re-establish certainty involve constant negotiations with other individuals or with states. Such negotiations often are given meaning within groups and/or institutions. Faced with the arbitrariness of life, with being betrayed by others, or with the randomness of asylum policies, people by and large re-establish certainty socially, with and through others. Religion may be an important form of searching for certainties that can be connected to conflict and displacement (W. James 1995), although radical uncertainty may also strongly challenge faith. In some contexts, a close extended family (clan, ethnic group) can provide security. Conversely, the family can be a great source of vulnerability as well, in the sense that many uncertainties are connected to family members and fears of what might happen to them.

Whatever the search for certainty involves, responses to uncertainty by individuals often lead to uncertainties for groups and states. Likewise, the attempts that states engage in to manage uncertainty may have strong negative effects on the level of certainty experienced by individuals and groups. Yet exactly in the openness created by uncertainty there is the potential for innovation and social transformation as well. The creative aspects of being in between—of being in a situation where 'normality' and the status quo are questioned and challenged in radical ways—are very interesting to explore, as Grabska and Fanjoy illustrate in their article on return to South Sudan. While the changing nature of things can lead to a desire to hold on to the familiar and a resistance to transformation for some, it creates opportunities for others. In short, there are winners and losers. There is a great deal of diversity in experiencing, narrating, and coping with the uncertainties created by conflict-induced displacement. As Grabska and Fanjoy clearly demonstrate, in particular gender, generational, mobility-related, and socio-economic differences play a role in people's experiences and choices and have an impact on the varying effects of uncertainty. Thus, it is crucial to identify the ways in which uncertainty becomes a limiting or liberating factor for different groups of people, rather than assuming that we already know what causes uncertainty for all.

The simultaneously limiting and liberating nature of uncertainty leads to crucial negotiations between men and women, young and old, those who stay

and those who return. During conflict and/or exile, differently positioned individuals experience life dissimilarly, since the social and moral order has been challenged in a range of ways. As in the process of repossession described by Ryan-Saha, taking life back into possession after displacement and conflict requires negotiation about what to refill it with—not just materially, but socially and symbolically as well. In these circumstances, as is also evident in Grabska and Fanjoy’s article, there are those who have an interest in upsetting the social order and transgressing norms during the negotiated process of emplacement.

## **In Conclusion**

In this introduction, we have illustrated how radical as well as protracted uncertainty is common in the various stages of the lives of those who are displaced by violent conflict. Radical uncertainty first manifests itself during the initial stages of a conflict and before flight, when there is a severe lack of information due to the speed with which changes occur and due to the unreliability of sources. It is characterized by the extreme unpredictability that the displaced face. Protracted uncertainty, on the other hand, can take place during protracted conflict, but it is used here mostly as an analytical tool to explore protracted displacement and exile. In protracted uncertainty, information is still scarce, but this may often be explained as a governance strategy. Furthermore, we may argue that protracted uncertainty is characterized by a great level of predictability with regard to the everyday present, but by an equally great level of unpredictability when it comes to people’s perceptions of a future solution for their problems. While radical and protracted uncertainties are closely interrelated, we have argued that the distinction between the two enables us to understand better the temporal and spatial dimensions at stake in conflict and displacement situations and ways to come to terms with them.

We have shown the unresolved relationship that many displaced people have with the temporal and spatial aspects of their situation. They are unable to live in the here and now, not only because they do not accept the status quo, but also because their presence is not accepted by many of the states who host them (Agier 2011; Arendt 1958; Malkki 1995b). The enormous emotional strain on the people involved is clearly expressed in the many references to a lost past and an uncertain future made by the interviewees cited in these pages. The various articles in this special issue offer analyses of governance through uncertainty, navigation in uncertainty, and negotiation beyond uncertainty. They challenge common understandings of uncertainty as the exception to a certain norm and underline that “uncertainty has to be accepted as a fundamental modern experience ... [that] should no longer be redefined as a problem of how to produce order and certainty” (Zinn 2006: 277).

While conflict and displacement result in radical uncertainty in the sense of a severe lack of information and an extremely unpredictable future, uncertainty is, after all, a human condition. Likewise, the suffering associated with war and famine, for example, “is normal—in experience, in cause and, finally, in the

methods people adopt to cope with it” (Davis 1992: 155). Yet our narratives about uncertainties—societal, historical, and academic—often do not acknowledge this. The ultimate way in which certainty is created is through how we narrate uncertainties. Risk research has shown that individuals have ‘ambiguity aversion’, or a preference for risk over uncertainty, so many of the unknowns of the future have been translated into calculated probabilities. The renarrating of individual stories into a coherent whole—by those affected by conflict and displacement, as well as by the researchers who spent so much time recording their words—in the end serves to transform uncertainty into certainty, disorder into order, and ambiguity into clarity. While this may be the ultimate way of coming to terms with uncertainty, its reality, equanimity, and creative potential may be lost in the process.

## Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all of the presenters and attendees who took part in the “Displacement and Uncertainty” workshop presented by the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA) in 2012. We particularly wish to thank Cathrine Brun for her comments on a draft version of this article.

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## Notes

1. We thank Cathrine Brun for making this point.
2. Such conditions are generally extremely tough. The European Court of Human Rights, for example, found that conditions in the Dadaab refugee camps of Kenya violated Article 3 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. This article stipulates that “No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”

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